How a lack of truthfulness can undermine democratic representation: The case of post-referendum Brexit discourses

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Abstract

This article draws attention to how the ethics of democratic representation operates as a discreet factor in a crisis of representation afflicting Western democracies by identifying the ways a disregard for truthfulness can harm democratic representation. We argue that such a disregard undermines democratic representation by (a) reducing freedom and equality, (b) weakening accountability, (c) undermining citizens' trust in democratic institutions, and (d) jeopardising the ability to compromise. We illustrate the processes that produce these effects by analysing examples of untruthful communication about Brexit by senior British politicians in the post-referendum debates. We show how all four of these effects were triggered by the ways they misled the public by (1) making claims about overwhelming popular support for their policy, (2) misrepresenting the power relations between the EU and the national government, and (3) seriously downplaying the complexity of negotiations involved in leaving the EU and reaching trade deals thereafter.

Keywords: democratic representation, accountability, truthfulness, Brexit, critical discourse analysis, lying, deception

1. Introduction

In representation theory, scholars have mainly addressed questions of formalistic, substantive, and descriptive representation (e.g., do existing mechanisms of authorisation and accountability still work satisfactorily? How can the link between represented and representative be strengthened? Should women represent women?) (Pitkin, 1967; Kröger and Friedrich, 2013). In contrast, little attention has been paid to the *ethics* of democratic representation, and specifically the virtues of elected representatives. This gap appears unwarranted in the light of the dynamic dimension of political representation stressed recently by scholars (see below), and particularly, the ways representatives exert power over the represented (Disch, 2011: 107-108; Saward, 2010).

In this contribution, we address this gap by what we consider a crucial virtue representatives should possess, namely truthfulness, and how its absence contributes to undermining democratic representation. We use the case of post 2016 referendum debates in the UK to develop the argument and discuss how untruthful or misleading language use by policymakers might have negative implications for democratic representation, and for citizens' faith in representative democracy as a whole. To address this qualitative question, one has to combine insights and analytic tools from two fields of research: (1) discourse studies that helps to uncover the mechanisms of deception in language use and demonstrate these by analysing some empirical cases in detail, and (2) democratic theory that provides a basis for spelling out the possible implications of various forms of untruthful communication for representation.

As we elaborate below, truthfulness matters for freedom and equality, accountability, citizens' trust in democratic institutions, and the ability to compromise. And yet, truthfulness as an established norm of democratic politics seems to be breaking down, whilst emotion and unfounded assertions are increasingly accepted as common currency. As 'facts' are disputed and 'experts' derided (Davies, 2018), boundaries between the 'real' and the 'fictional' become increasingly blurred, leading to the fictionalisation of politics (Wodak, 2011). In Hannah Arendt's (1967) words, 'what is at stake here is … common and factual reality itself, and this is indeed a political problem of the first order'.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we spell out why democratic representation requires truthfulness, with truthfulness relying on accuracy (the information is not false and can be publically verified) and sincerity (the representative is honest and does not seek to mislead or deceive). If elected representatives do not give accurate information, citizens cannot count on the policies they are proposing actually being in the citizens' interest. And if elected representatives are not sincere, citizens do not know whether they will actually do what they said they would do. Both will make it harder for citizens to know which representative best aligns with their interest and so make democratic representation problematic. Both will undermine citizens' ability to hold officeholders to account. Of course, we cannot always be sure whether politicians knowingly seek to deceive or whether they simply try to persuade their audiences. Normatively, however, any departure from truthfulness has deleterious effects on democratic representation and, ultimately, on representative democracy as it affects citizens' trust in government and people's ability to compromise. Second, we introduce our methodology (pragmatism), method (discourse analysis), and data set. Third, we discuss the possible implications of untruthful communication for freedom and equality, accountability, trust in democratic institutions, and the ability to compromise and illustrate these with

statements about Brexit made between 2017 and 2019 by leading British policymakers. We conclude by discussing the relevance of our findings for the ethics of democratic representation and by proposing avenues for future research.

2. How truthfulness matters for democratic representation

The crisis of democratic representation has been associated with a loss of faith in representative democracy more generally, including the effectiveness of the democratic mechanisms of authorisation and accountability in ensuring politicians respond to the concerns of the increasingly diverse electorate, and a weakening of the links between citizens and representative actors and institutions (Mair, 2013; Rosanvallon, 2015). This crisis has resulted in falling electoral turnouts, a decline in party and union membership, lower levels of trust in representative institutions and actors, poor electoral representation of lower social classes, and the increasing electoral success of populists and their parties. All indicate the dissatisfaction many citizens feel with how the established political actors represent them.

The literature on democratic representation has standardly concerned itself with either formalistic or substantive representation (Pitkin, 1967), and, to a lesser extent, descriptive representation. *Formalistic* representation refers to the institutional mechanisms which formalise the representative relationship through representative institutions and a representative government. *Substantive* representation is interested in the different ways a representative may stand or act for the represented. Descriptive representation is concerned with whether representatives should share some social characteristic with those they represent. However, little attention has been paid to the *ethics* of democratic representation.

This gap appears unwarranted in the light of the dynamic dimension of political representation stressed recently by scholars (Urbinati, 2000; Saward, 2010; Disch, 2011). They note how representatives do not simply mirror already existing political identities in the electorate. Rather, representation is the product of an on-going interaction between representatives and represented, in which both are mutually and continuously constituted. Just as the represented influence the representatives by expressing preferences for certain policies over others, so do the representatives influence the represented by making certain claims rather than others, portraying social reality in a certain light rather than in a different one, defining political options and so on, thereby contributing to the constitution of constituents' ways of looking at the world. In other words, representatives influence and shape the preferences of their constituents (Disch, 2011: 107-108; Saward, 2010), thereby exerting political power. If we accept this idea, then the quality of democratic representation cannot derive solely from the nature of the electoral system. Instead, the ethical qualities of representatives, in other words their *virtues*, influence how *democratic* representation is overall (Dovi, 2007). Whilst we follow the constructivist reasoning on the interactive constitution of political representation, and thus recognise the part and responsibility that citizens play in it, this contribution focuses on the role of virtues displayed by the representatives.

Very little attention has been paid to the virtues that a good representative should possess, Suzanne Dovi (2007) being the exception. She argues that democratic representatives ought to have three virtues: they must be fair-minded, build critical trust, and be good gatekeepers. The second virtue refers to the representative's capacity to engage citizens in a way that increases their critical trust. Dovi argues that one of the ways of doing so is by constituting

good role models. Though Dovi herself does not include truthfulness in her related discussion, we will suggest that this virtue should be part of being a role model.

2.1 What is truthfulness

How to define truthfulness is by no means straightforward, given the many grey areas between telling the truth and lying, and the degree of deliberate intention to deceive that they involve. By what means can we distinguish intentionally from unintentionally deceptive or misleading statements? Or mild exaggeration from outright lies? When do errors due to poor memory shade into confabulation (see Fallis, 2009)? What these questions indicate is that there are (at least) two aspects to truthfulness (and to lying by extension). On the one hand, there is the epistemological domain of truth and falsity, on the other hand there is the moral domain of truthfulness and deception (Meibauer, 2018). Bernard Williams (2002) described these two elements of truthfulness as referring respectively to accuracy and sincerity.

The virtue of accuracy does not necessarily assume the existence of a truth to be truthful about. It does not mean anyone has a monopoly on truth. As John Rawls (1993) observed, different life experiences, the plurality of moral values, and the limits of our practical reasoning render reasonable disagreements of the kind that animate political debate inevitable. Still, if politicians do not seek to give voters accurate, factual information about the policies they propose to implement, then voters cannot assess if their proposed programmes will be in their interests or not. In other words, accuracy involves a scrupulousness to avoid being false in the senses of conveying information that may not be well-founded.

The moral question of whether someone is sincere in the sense that they are not consciously intending to deceive or mislead is not settled merely by establishing whether someone provides accurate information. In order to answer this question, one must know whether a person intends to mislead those they address. Lying is one of the ways of deceiving or misleading others. Lying can be defined as the deliberate assertion of what the liar believes to be false, with the intention of creating a false belief in others (Bok, 1978; Fallis, 2009). Liars are unscrupulous with regard to sincerity and accuracy in being deliberately false with regard to both. So are those who deploy misleading truths to convey a false impression (Sandel, 2009: 134-138).

However, misleading others can happen in a number of different ways, such as discursive manipulation and misrepresentation, not just in outright lying. For instance, 'bullshitting' involves an indifference to the truth of one's utterances (Frankfurt, 2005; Spicer, 2017). Bullshitters lack scruples regarding sincerity and accuracy and so feel free to say whatever they consider will play well with their audience and advance their interests, whether or not those assertions are true. Deception may also involve calculated oversupply of irrelevant information (Hansson, 2015) to produce 'information overload', or on the contrary, withholding parts of the information needed by interlocutors.

Religious traditions and philosophers across the centuries have suggested that individuals should not lie. Some have claimed that the related manipulation may be permissible to realise certain goals that are in the public interest (Machiavelli, 1513; Walzer, 1973). Others (Bok, 1978; Goodin, 1980; Williams, 2002) with whom we agree have argued that the manipulation associated with a lack of truthfulness is incompatible with the normative basis of democracy as a system that treats all citizens as entitled to equal respect and concern. Admittedly, some

citizens either do not seem to care about being lied to or perhaps even enjoy being told ‘sweet lies’ by their leaders. Worse still, some vote intentionally for those candidates who they know are often economical with the truth. They may see politics primarily as ‘carnival’ and politicians as ‘carnival fools’, and so do not expect them to do what they said they would do (Gaufman, 2018). It is also true that many citizens are active carriers of misinformation (Kuklinski et al., 2000), may be motivated by the protection of their preexisting opinions rather than truth-seeking (Bisgaard, 2019), and will not change their view regardless of what information is passed on to them (Flynn, Nyhan and Reifler 2017). However, this does not free politicians from the obligation to act morally and seek to avoid having ‘dirty hands’ (Walzer, 1973). Political leaders have a particular responsibility to behave ethically, and not least to speak truthfully (Walzer, 1973). Therefore, our focus here is on political leaders. We suggest that their truthfulness is important for democratic representation in four ways. *Freedom and political equality* are essential values and *accountability* an essential mechanism for democratic representation. *Trust in democratic institutions* and the *ability to compromise* are essential preconditions for representative democracy. We will now address each of these in turn.

2.2 Truthfulness matters for freedom and political equality

Deception, be it through outright lying or misleading information, produces a reduction in freedom and equality. By withholding relevant information from citizens, those who mislead reduce citizens’ ability to make a reasoned and informed choice, thereby reducing their personal freedom and power. When politicians are not truthful, creating a false or ill-founded impression within citizens that they support their views and preferences and have credible policy proposals for promoting them without doing so, they are manipulating citizens

(Goodin, 1980), controlling their thinking and distorting the deceived's perspective on the world and their possible future, leading to misdirected choices of action.

> Both the illusion and elimination of choice limit the deceived's freedom. /…/ The lie not only determines what the deceived thinks about, but it skews how he thinks of things. /…/ Lying establishes conditions of unfreedom in that it restricts choice by making alternatives unavailable or ineligible. Since restricting reasoning necessarily restricts freedom, restriction of freedom is inherent in lying. (Kupfer 1982: 106-7)

Via deception, citizens are also denied the possibility of giving or refusing consent. Given that politicians do not simply reflect but also shape citizens' political preferences (Saward, 2010), making representation an exercise of influence and political power, truthfulness is especially important for citizens to be free and equal. Equality is furthermore reduced because deception creates divisions between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' – those who know and those who do not – as well as between those whose position is represented in political debates and those whose position is not.

2.3 Truthfulness matters for accountability

One of the central conditions for representation to be *democratic* is that those who are represented have the means to authorise representatives to represent them as well as to hold them accountable for their activities. To do so, citizens need to have sufficient knowledge of relevant actors, processes, and policy problems as well as of potential solutions. Only when armed with such knowledge can they choose political representatives who are consistent with their own interests and hold them to account (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Milner, 2002).

To acquire the knowledge necessary for accountability, there needs to be reasonable public debates where representatives provide their (competing) accounts of social circumstances and possible common courses of action in a sincere and accurate way. If, instead, representatives chose to mislead the citizens they are supposed to represent, the represented will not be able to judge in what ways and how well they are being represented. Likewise, if government representatives are not truthful, it will not be possible for the opposition to hold government to account, given a common basis of what constitutes the 'truth' will not be available.[2]

2.4 Truthfulness matters for citizens' trust in democratic institutions

Trust can be defined in a political context as the 'summary judgement that the system is responsive and will do what is right even in the absence of constant scrutiny' (Miller and Listhaug, 1990: 358). As such, it links ordinary citizens to the institutions that are intended to represent them (Bianco, 1994), thereby enhancing both the legitimacy and the effectiveness of democratic government (Braithwaite and Levi, 1998; Hetherington, 1998), not least by ensuring an adherence to the rule of law. Trust is essential for social cohesion and well-being as it affects governments' ability to govern and enables them to act without having to resort to coercion. Political trust is necessary for a functional democratic politics (e.g., Lenard, 2012; Levi and Stoker, 2000; Warren, 2018) whereas in the absence of trust, citizens are likely to become disillusioned with democracy (Rainie, Keeter and Perrin, 2019). Whilst political trust is multifaceted, the integrity of political leaders is generally seen as particularly important (OECD 2013: 31; Edelman 2020). Integrity here is taken to mean that political leaders align with broader ethical principles of conduct, not least honesty. In the UK, this concern has been reflected in the code of conduct for holders of public office (the 'Nolan Principles') which include integrity and honesty ("The Seven Principles of Public Life",

1995). It is easy to see, then, how a lack of truthfulness, defined by the absence of accuracy and sincerity, links to citizens' perceptions of integrity and therefore their trust in democratic institutions (Bok, 1978; Williams, 2002).

2.5 Truthfulness matters for the ability to compromise

The 'communicability of intersubjective perspectives' (Coleman, 2018: 158), in other words the capacity to collectively form a political judgement, matters crucially in any political community (Pettit, 2012). This is so because 'politics emerges in response to the irreconcilability of multiple conflicting perspectives, values and interests' (Coleman, 2018: 161). The only way of pacifying these conflicts in a democratic political community, is to engage in an intersubjective exercise of judgement and compromise, and this exercise must be built on the truthfulness of those participating in it. To do so, citizens and elected representatives need to apprehend and understand perspectives that are different from their own, so as to be able to see the fuller picture of any given problem and make a judgement in the light of all existing arguments. Disagreements may continue to exist, yet so long as they can be regarded as competing and inevitably partial attempts to grasp the truth then each side has a reason to accommodate or compromise with the other (Bellamy, 1999). If, instead, rival political positions become characterised as a conflict between truth and falsehood or among representatives who are knowingly misleading the public, then the ability to compromise is jeopardised and increasing ideological polarization becomes likely.

3. Methodology, method and data set

Rather than following standard approaches of empirical enquiry, the present study has adopted a *pragmatic* research strategy (Friedrichs and Kratochwil, 2009). *Pragmatism* rejects ontological realism and the correspondence theory of truth. Instead, it reinstates the provisional character of knowledge. It insists that both knowledge and reality are based on beliefs and habits that are socially constructed.

There are two methodological implications. First, a pragmatic study cannot be a deductive one: 'If it is true that the subject is always implicated in the constitution of the object, then there can be no direct testing against reality' (Friedrichs and Kratochwil, 2009: 705). In our study, a deductive design would not work because we are not exploring constant features of political behaviour but rather particular cases that are illustrative of how politicians in the specific context of the post-referendum Brexit debate in the UK could be regarded as undermining democratic representation through certain untruthful utterances. In such a situation, which is characterised by multiple uncertainties, empirical research requires new approaches that accommodate these uncertainties, which is what pragmatism proposes (Friedrichs and Kratochwil, 2009: 709). Second, a pragmatic study is also not necessarily an inductive one, in that its goal is not to arrive at conclusions that can be generalised. The goal, therefore, is not to arrive at authoritative, generalisable conclusions about the absence of truthfulness and the implications for democratic representation, but rather to explore possible interactions between the former and the latter, something that the more recent scholarship on lying, fake news etc. has not engaged in (e.g., van Aelst et al., 2017; Bennett and Livingston, 2018). Indeed, pragmatism is typically associated with abductive reasoning that moves back and forth between deduction and induction (Goldkuhl, 2012). Conceptually, a pragmatic

research strategy is fairly close to social constructivism. From such a perspective, the choices that actors make in their communicative behaviour become crucial to understanding their engagement with the democratic system, and a main way of getting at actors' communicative choices is through discourse analysis.

Discourse analysis is well suited for a pragmatic enquiry into the effects of untruthfulness in a given context because the constitution of the interests of the represented is moulded within discursive relationships (Manin, 1997). According to Michael Saward, representation 'is made, or constructed, by someone, for someone, and for a purpose' (Saward, 2010: 13; see also Disch, 2011). This constructive approach thereby shifts the attention around political representation to speech acts that establish representative relationships (Saward, 2010). To assess whether the political judgements citizens make about the speech acts of representatives can enact democratic citizenship, we need to look at the conditions under which judgments are formed (Mansbridge, 2009: 391). In the present context, this will involve assessing whether these judgements were made in a discursive environment that is committed to truthfulness.

Drawing on concepts and methods from linguistic pragmatics, semantics, rhetoric, argumentation theory, and cognitive sciences, critical discourse analysts have sought to unveil instances of deception (Galasiński, 2000; Oswald, Maillat and de Saussure, 2016), manipulation (van Dijk, 2006; Maillat and Oswald 2011), misrepresentation (Chilton, 2004; van Leeuwen, 2018), and argumentative fallacies (Reisigl, 2014) in various genres of political text and talk. Language-based research of untruthful communication generally focuses on a particular text's relationship with reality (e.g., is that what has been said or written false or distorted?) and regards instances of deception as covertly uncooperative acts

(Galasiński, 2018). Discourse analysts may try to identify inconsistencies and contradictions in a politician's text (e.g., showing that her political speech contains contradictory claims), point out differences between what the politician says/writes and what other texts say on the same issue, and engage in ethnographic research to document the differences between real social practices and the way in which a politician depicts them in her text or talk (van Leeuwen, 2018).

Linguistic discourse analysis as a method does not include any specific tools that would let researchers peek into speakers' or writers' minds to detect their intentions as they use language to deceive others. We can interpret empirical evidence of their communicative behaviour – their words – but cannot, for example, pinpoint differences between the sincerely held beliefs of politicians and the beliefs they profess publicly. To detect discursive manipulation, analysts have to pay particularly careful attention to non-linguistic contextual factors, because manipulation often involves extensive use of discursive group polarisation (i.e., positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation) and other discursive strategies focused on potential vulnerabilities of recipients (e.g., their strong emotions or traumas, their lack of relevant knowledge, their lower status) which make the recipients less resistant to accepting untruthful assertions (van Dijk, 2006). From a normative point of view, it is also possible to uncover instances of fallacious and potentially misleading argumentation in politicians' text and talk, such as truth claims that are not logically valid or that rely on implausible argument schemes (Reisigl, 2014).

We apply analytic tools from these approaches to concrete samples of political text and talk about Brexit. We focus on statements made between March 2017 and May 2019 by then Prime Minister Theresa May, then Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, the international trade

secretary Liam Fox, and the Chairman of the Conservative Party Brandon Lewis. They were key figures in government and bore responsibility for enacting Brexit. As a result, they had a particular obligation to be honest about the exit negotiations. Their statements were widely covered in the British news media and attracted public criticism for containing misleading assertions. We do not claim, of course, that there has been no untruthful communication on the side of the opposition, but for the purpose of this article we have chosen to zoom in on the (potentially) deceptive language use by those actors who held powerful executive positions and implemented their Brexit policies. As our concern here is with their linguistic behaviour, we analyse their exact words and not the journalistic news framings of or media discourses about their statements. More concretely, our sample included 165 official statements by Prime Minister Theresa May and 15 statements by Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson filed under the topic 'Transition period' on the gov.uk website, and 32 articles from bbc.co.uk that contained statements on Brexit by Liam Fox and Brandon Lewis. We draw examples from this data set to explore and illustrate the phenomenon under investigation.

4. Analysis of post-referendum Brexit discourses

Below, we unpick some of the potentially deceptive discursive moves used by leading policymakers in the UK since the referendum. We use these to discuss how a disregard for truthfulness may undermine democratic representation by (a) reducing freedom and equality, (b) weakening accountability, (c) undermining citizens' trust in democratic institutions, and (d) jeopardising the ability to compromise.

4.1 Reducing freedom and equality

As regards freedom, democratic representation requires citizens who possess accurate information that allows them to freely choose between different courses of action which are actually available. When politicians systematically disregard the multiplicity of (often conflicting) interests and needs of different societal groups and distort the number of possible way of actions, citizens may be led to believe that fewer options are available than is the case in reality, and so their freedom is reduced. The examples we discuss below are therefore illustrations of language use that could negatively affect citizens' freedom.

Equality is likewise undermined by politicians when they claim that their version of Brexit is something that 'everyone' wants. Politicians tend to violate the expectation of truthful communication when they try to depict their policies as being supported by a popular consensus. After the Brexit referendum, Brexit supporters have often talked of the British people as an indivisible, unitary body (Freeden, 2017; Weale, 2018), thereby disregarding the significant divisions in society with regard to EU membership. For example, Prime Minister Theresa May gave a speech on Brexit in Grimsby on 8 March 2019, a week before a vote on her 'Brexit deal' (Withdrawal Agreement) in the House of Commons, where she claimed that her 'deal' is beneficial to all nations of the UK:

> By reflecting the interests and serving the needs of Scotland and Wales, Northern Ireland and England, the deal will keep our precious Union of four proud nations strong and united. (PM speech in Grimsby, 2019)

Here, May depicts 'the deal' as a social actor that does good things to the members of the UK – it reflects their interests and serves their needs – and thereby keeps the Union united. This

should be seen as an attempt to present her policy proposal in a positive light by appealing to audience's presumably shared sense of common interests and unity, as well as feelings of national pride. However, considering that only three days earlier the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament had rejected the deal in a joint motion ("Brexit: Scottish and Welsh," 2019), this depiction of her policy proposal cannot be supported by evidence. Polls additionally showed that in Scotland, 64 per cent of respondents wanted to remain in the EU (whatukthinks.org, 2019b) and 53 per cent said Scottish independence would be better for Scotland than leaving the EU on the terms of the Prime Minister's deal (whatukthinks.org, 2019c). In Wales, only 22 per cent supported the draft Brexit deal (whatukthinks.org, 2019d). Therefore, May's claim could be regarded, in van Leeuwen's (2018) terms, as discursive misrepresentation: there are significant differences between what the politician says and what other credible sources say on the same issue.

In the same speech on 8 March 2019, Prime Minister May said:

> But Brexit does not belong to MPs in Parliament. It belongs to the whole country.
> It belongs to the people who voted for it and want to see it implemented, so we can all move on to a prosperous future.
> And that more prosperous future also belongs to those who voted against Brexit, and who expect politicians to make reasonable compromises to bring our country back together.
> Everyone now wants to get it done. (PM speech in Grimsby, 2019)

In this example, the claim that 'everyone' wants to 'get Brexit done' is not truthful. In linguistic terms, 'everyone' here is a hyperbole, a rhetorical device that uses extreme

exaggeration to make a point. Hyperboles are commonly used in political persuasion, advertising, and humor (Claridge, 2010). However, considering that, at the time, opinion polls in the UK had consistently shown more than 40 per cent support to remaining in the European Union (whatukthinks.org, 2019a), the use of extreme exaggeration by a very senior politician in her unambiguous truth claim can be regarded as an unwarranted distortion of facts. Notably, the results of the British Social Attitudes Survey carried out by the National Centre for Social Research in 2019 have shown a "potential frailty of arguments that leaving the EU is necessarily the 'will' of a majority of the British public" (Lusher, 2019).

By claiming that 'everyone' wants to get Brexit done, representatives not only make a factually wrong statement, thereby misleading citizens, which, as we have explained, by definition reduces their freedom. They also fundamentally misconceive of democracy as a process in which losers in one election, referendum or debate can be winners in the next, a feature that is essential to the legitimacy of any democratic system (Dunn 1999: 332). As a result, they seem to consider it acceptable to contain public contestation of their political choices by insisting that all those who oppose the result of the referendum are opposing the will of the people. However, there are always different views in politics that need to be respected, making the idea of a single will of the people a myth (Weale, 2018). The usage of the idea of a unified will seeks to let these differences disappear, with the dissenting views being those who lose in political equality. Democratic representation is undermined in the process for those not represented in 'the will of the people'.

4.2 Weakening accountability

Accountability involves the possibility of reasonable public debate where participants provide their (competing) accounts of social circumstances and possible common courses of action.

Therefore, attempts at closing down public debate are the opposite of allowing for accountability mechanisms to work. It is the course of action Theresa May seemed to chose when she declared on 25 November 2018:

> The British people don't want to spend any more time arguing about Brexit. They want a good deal done that fulfils the vote and allows us to come together again as a country. (PM's EU Council press statement, 2018)

Again, the Prime Minister makes a strong unmitigated claim about what the 'British people' want, which, as shown above, was not confirmed by available polling data at the time. She suggests there is no need for a further political debate on Brexit. By claiming that people do not want to 'spend any more time' debating, she seems to call for a quick approval of her policy proposal, thereby disregarding an important principle of accountability: that people may need more time to acquire the knowledge necessary for evaluating the pros and cons of a possible common course of action. She opts out of a meaningful conversation with the public, thereby working against the idea of accountability. Indeed, avoiding accountability for difficult decisions may sometimes be the reason why governments initiate referendums in the first place (Setälä, 2006). Even though the PM might not seek to deliberately mislead the public, she does not stick with the truth either but bends it as she sees it. Under the normative standard for accountability developed above, her statements are therefore problematic.

4.3 Undermining citizens' trust in democratic institutions

As with freedom, a lack of truthfulness by political leaders in general undermines political trust. In that sense, all the examples listed in this section illustrate this point. Trust is

particularly undermined by officeholders who lack integrity in the sense that they make insincere and inaccurate claims.

For instance, when voting results are interpreted in confusing or misleading ways by politicians, citizens may not only grow increasingly distrustful towards political elites but also think of the democratic system as defective (Rainie, Keeter and Perrin, 2019). For example, after Brexit-supporting Conservatives and Labour Councillors suffered considerable losses while pro-EU Liberal Democrats and the Greens gained seats in the May 2019 local elections, the Chairman of the Conservative Party Brandon Lewis told the BBC Today programme that there was a 'very clear message to both parties that we have got to get on with getting Brexit done' ("Local elections," 2019).

> I absolutely accept that there is huge frustration, not just with our members and activists, but the public around where parliament and we have got ourselves to on delivering on Brexit. I think there is a very clear message to both parties that we have to get on with getting Brexit done. ("Tory chairman says," 2019)

Here, Lewis presents an argument that could be restated as follows: Conservatives and Labour should make sure the UK leaves the European Union (claim) because Conservatives and Labour suffered losses at local elections (premise). From the perspective of argumentation (Reisigl, 2014), this argument is fallacious: the fact that Brexit-supporting parties lost seats could be interpreted as a sign of growing opposition to Brexit rather than public demand to 'get Brexit done'.

Another way by which representatives undermine trust in representative institutions is when they exploit people's ignorance about specific governance structures. For instance, British politicians may try to cast the UK government as a helpless actor who has no say in various decisions by the EU that could affect their country in an adverse way. On the one hand, this can be interpreted as a personal strategy of blame avoidance, whereby policymakers seek to rhetorically minimise their own agency in order to attract less blame for a controversial or loss-inducing policy or outcome.[3] In the context of EU multi-level governance, the prevalence of political blame-shifting is well documented (Hobolt and Tilley, 2014; Schlipphak and Treib, 2017). On the other hand, such claims can be exploited to promote an overall anti-EU stance by depicting the EU as an oppressor who severely limits various sovereign rights and freedoms of national governments, or perhaps even holds them hostage.

Before the referendum, Leave campaigners made such references in support of their campaign promise to 'take back control' from the EU. For example, on 22 May 2016, Armed Forces Minister Penny Mordaunt claimed on the BBC that the UK was powerless to prevent the EU admitting Turkey as a member state ("Penny Mordaunt," 2016). It was a stark illustration of dishonest communication because even the Prime Minister at the time pointed out that the claim was not true (Asthana, 2016). But rhetorical moves to a similar effect were made by ministers also later during the exit negotiations. For example, on 14 February 2018, the Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson gave a speech on Brexit where he knowingly depicted the EU in a negative and inaccurate way when he said:

> It is only by taking back control of our laws that UK firms and entrepreneurs will have the freedom to innovate, without the risk of having to comply with some directive devised by Brussels, at the urgings of some lobby group, with the specific

> aim of holding back a UK competitor. (Uniting for a Great Brexit: Foreign Secretary's speech, 2018)

Here, Johnson juxtaposes 'our laws' (i.e. UK national legislation) with 'directives devised by Brussels' (which stands metonymically for the EU) thereby creating an 'Us' vs 'Them' polarisation that seems to suggest that the UK has no say in EU decision making – notwithstanding that the representatives of each member state, including the UK, are actually active participants in shaping EU legislation. He depicts the EU as posing a 'risk' to British companies and limiting their 'freedom to innovate' but does not provide any evidence to support that proposition. Actually, the UK had been leading in creating and shaping the single market programme (Wall, 2008: 41-61). Moreover, the big lobby groups in Brussels are not known for holding back competition/regulation but rather for backing it (Green Cowles, 1995). It is likely that Johnson, a former journalist in Brussels, knew this and made an insincere and deliberately dishonest statement. For those who did not know much about the EU, he probably contributed to undermining trust in the EU. For those more knowledgeable about the EU, the above statement by Johnson will likely have contributed to undermining trust in him. While some may argue that Johnson did not lie deliberately or that he resembles more the figure of a 'bullshitter' (Frankfurt, 2005), this does not affect our argument that he harms democracy both empirically as well as normatively. Empirically, a certain number of citizens will believe him and therefore will believe something that is factually wrong. Normatively, representative democracy is being harmed by a leading figure of government not adhering to established standards of integrity.

Already in the run-up to the 2016 referendum in the UK, 46 per cent of respondents to a survey felt that politicians across the campaign debates were 'mostly telling lies', whilst only

19 per cent thought that they were ‘mostly telling the truth’ (whatukthinks.org, 2016). It is therefore no surprise that the trust levels in the UK saw a historical low point after the referendum. The Edelman (2020) trust survey revealed that the UK was at its lowest ever position in a table of trust among the mass populations of 28 countries, not least because officeholders are perceived as less ethical than in other countries, with 2 in 3 saying the way politicians behave undermines trust in government, and 3 in 5 agreeing politicians have become more likely to lie or mislead the British public. Similarly, a survey by BritainThinks of June 2019 indicated an astonishing lack of faith in the political system among the British people, with 75 per cent saying that UK politics is not fit for purpose, and 83 per cent feeling let down by the political establishment (Iqbal, 2019).

While citizens who have a cautious attitude – ‘liberal distrust’ (Bertsou, 2019) – towards powerful officeholders may be seen as a desirable element of representative democracy, a cynical distrust in political institutions and mechanisms of representation further erodes societal trust levels and weakens the preconditions of democratic representation (Butzlaff and Messinger-Zimmer, 2019).

4.4 Jeopardising the ability to compromise

Domestically, the ability to compromise was undermined by narrowing down the meaning of ‘leaving the EU’ to a very specific type of ‘Brexit’ without considering alternative options, and by suggesting that this specific type enjoyed overwhelming support. Regarding the EU, British representatives sometimes depicted their negotiating partner as an enemy or completely dismissed the inherent complexity of negotiations over major policy issues, thereby reducing the chances of making compromises that could be deemed acceptable

domestically. For example, on 3 May 2017, five weeks before general elections in the UK, Prime Minister May gave a speech where she claimed:

> The European Commission's negotiating stance has hardened. Threats against Britain have been issued by European politicians and officials.
> All of these acts have been deliberately timed to affect the result of the general election that will take place on 8 June. (“Theresa May,” 2017)

These claims were rejected by the European Commission: their spokesperson said that they were ‘too busy’ to interfere in UK general election (Stone, 2017). However, the depiction of ‘European politicians and officials’ as ill-willed and dangerous actors may reduce British citizen’s willingness to accept the idea that their government should accommodate any requests made by the European Commission. Via this portrayal, people are invited to regard the exit negotiations essentially as an aggressive conflict where a peaceful resolution cannot be achieved. British government cannot easily engage in an intersubjective exercise of judgement and compromise with representatives of the Commission when the latter are increasingly perceived by the public as enemies. Instead of a subject of debate and possible mutual accommodation, having rival political positions may become treated as a cause for relentless battle between the UK and the EU. This kind of extensive group polarisation via negative other-presentation is typical of discursive manipulation (van Dijk, 2006).

May’s discursive move – the suggestion that the EU aims to hurt Britain – could be seen as being consistent with the results of previous studies on British rhetorical identity in relation to the EU. For instance, a corpus linguistic study of the debates of the British House of Commons between 1973 and 2015 shows that British politicians have tended to construct the

UK “as an outsider and as a nation insecure of its role in the EU” throughout its membership (Riihimäki, 2019).

Both before and after the 2016 referendum, several Brexit-supporting politicians also seriously downplayed the complexity of negotiations involved in leaving the EU and reaching trade deals thereafter. For example, on 20 July 2017, the international trade secretary Liam Fox said on the BBC Radio 4’s Today programme:

> The free trade agreement that we will have to do with the European Union should be one of the easiest in human history. (“Liam Fox”, 2017)

While Fox expressed a strong but not complete commitment to the truth of the proposition (‘should be’), he stood by his claim three months later, on 22 October 2017, in an interview on ITV (Buchanan, 2017). However, on 5 August 2018, Fox stated that the UK is more likely to leave the EU without agreeing a deal over their future relationship (Wheeler et al., 2018). In a similar vein, David Davis, who served as Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union from July 2016 to July 2018, has claimed on several occasions that Brexit was simple (Media Mole, 2019).

These claims have proved wildly inaccurate, as the many complications and setbacks of Brexit negotiations have been detailed in the press, two Brexit Secretaries, David Davies and Dominic Raab, resigned in the process, and Cabinet Office documentation has revealed “chaotic planning for no-deal Brexit” (Hopkins, 2019). While the statements by Fox and Davis may have been intended to persuade British citizens to support government policy by depicting the Brexit process as smooth and painless, they thereby reduced the space for

compromise necessary to collectively form political judgements and reach ‘deals’ both at national and international levels.

5. Concluding remarks

This study began with the assumption that the crisis of representation in contemporary Western democracies, whereby many citizens believe that politicians do not represent their views and interests, is in part a cause and in part a result of a public perception that elected representatives are not committed to truthfulness. We defined truthfulness as consisting of accuracy and sincerity, and outlined four ways in which truthfulness matters for democratic representation, namely for freedom and political equality, for accountability, for citizens’ trust in representative institutions, and for the ability to compromise. As an example, we presented a critical discourse analysis of concrete instances of untruthful communication about Brexit by senior policymakers in the British post-referendum debates and discussed how these might undermine democratic representation.

The overall goal of all of the statements we looked at in the analysis section was to persuade the British public to side with the government during the exit negotiations. Even if we cannot be sure whether these politicians intended to mislead the public, the misrepresentations of facts in their statements is problematic for democratic representation. These political leaders made exaggerated claims about overwhelming popular support for their policy (e.g., populist appeals suggesting that ‘everyone’/ the ’British people’ wanted their version of Brexit), misrepresented the power relations between the EU and the national government, and downplayed the complexity of international negotiations. These statements by powerful political actors should not be dismissed as ‘mere rhetoric’. Repetition of inaccurate or

misleading (e.g. hyperbolic) claims, even when many know these are not true, can have the effect of changing minds, derailing rational debates over policy issues, and hurting democratic representation as well as representative democracy more broadly. Empirically, it does not make a difference whether officeholders seek to deceive or not: As soon as they do not provide accurate information, they spread falsehoods and thereby distort reality and reduce the space for compromise. Normatively, the damage to representative democracy likewise occurs regardless of their intentions, by reducing freedom and equality as well as the ability to hold politicians to account, with the overall effect of trust levels in representative democracies lowering.

Our study has implications beyond Britain and Brexit. We have pointed at a possible avenue for empirical studies into the ethics of democratic representation with a special focus on the problem of (un)truthfulness. First, analytical approaches from discourse studies could be used to identify and describe concrete instances of manipulative or deceptive text and talk by political officeholders. Second, careful explanations, rooted in democratic theory, could be provided as to how every particular deceptive utterance could harm a specific dimension or precondition of democratic representation.

We hope scholars of democracy will increasingly turn their attention to the ethics of representation and the potentially manipulative discursive practices of political representatives. It is also vital to develop a better understanding of why a considerable number of citizens continue to support political leaders who are notorious for being economical with the truth. One explanation may be in the way claims to a monopoly of truth by established politicians can be misleading, e.g., their claims that there are no alternatives to a given course of action. Populist leaders and parties have exploited the resulting ‘politics of

resentment' that such discourses of 'truth' can create among those citizens who are marginalised by them (Mudde, 2004). Paradoxically, sometimes a 'lying demagogue will seem more authentic' (Hahl et al., 2018: 4) than mainstream politicians, and the more demagogues distance themselves from the norms of truthfulness associated with the establishment, the more credible they will appear to 'those who see such norms as instruments of social control' (Hahl et al., 2018: 6). Indeed, this seems to be the case with Brexit politics in the UK. In the words of Colin Hay (2019: 13), 'above all, Brexit represents a rejection of the politics of expertise'. Does this rejection mean more and more people do not want or expect politicians to make accurate factual claims that are supported by evidence or expertise? As the status of truthfulness in representative politics has become unnervingly shaky, instances of 'dangerous demagoguery' (Mercieca, 2019) – attempts at discursive manipulation to gain compliance and evade accountability – deserve further critical study.

Notes

1. Brexit has been increasingly studied by discourse analysts as a political and linguistic phenomenon (e.g., Koller et al., 2019; Zappettini and Krzyżanowski, 2019). Moreover, while there have been a number of scholarly contributions on the democratic qualities of the process leading to the referendum (Bellamy, 2019; Kröger, 2019) and on how the UK Parliament performed poorly as regards accountability after the vote (Chalmers, 2017), relatively little has been written about the democracy of the post-referendum Brexit processes.
2. We are grateful to Vivien A. Schmidt for pointing this out.
3. For various discursive strategies used for blame avoidance in government, see Hansson (2017, 2018, 2019).

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